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ABSTRACT

This study examined the opinions and practices of 59 of Alabama's rehabilitation counselors who are assigned to serve secondary students with disabilities. Results are presented within the areas of: (1) Individualized Transition Program; (2) student/parent participation in transition, (3) assessment, (4) vocational preparation, (5) service coordination, and (6) transition outcomes. The counselors viewed all six transition components as important or very important. Findings revealed that, in spite of the perceived importance of individualized transition planning meetings, nearly half of the counselors reported that they seldom or never attended them. Nearly 85 percent of the counselors attested to the importance of their clients being actively involved in developing their own transition plans and programs, but over half were only moderately satisfied or less than moderately satisfied with their clients' level of involvement. Nearly 40 percent of the counselors were only moderately satisfied or less than moderately satisfied with assessment information and its usefulness in helping them to make appropriate client decisions. Only 27 percent of counselors reported that their transition clients participated in community-based, work experience programs. Over half of the counselors were only moderately satisfied or less than moderately satisfied with coordination of services among various agencies. Implications for training, research, and policy making are discussed. (Contains 14 references.) (JDD)

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Alabama's Rehabilitation Transition Counselors: A Statewide Study

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*The purpose of this study was to examine the opinions and practices of Alabama's rehabilitation counselors who are assigned to serve secondary students with disabilities. A questionnaire, which consisted of 60 items clustered into seven categories, was sent to all counselors serving transition clients (students with disabilities from ages 15-25). Fifty-nine of the 76 counselors serving transition clients completed their survey for a return rate of 78%. The results and their implications for either training, research, and policy making are discussed within the areas of (a) Individualized Transition Program: IEP/IWRP, (b) Student/Parent Participation in Transition, (c) Assessment, (d) Vocational Preparation, (e) Service Coordination, and (f) Transition Outcome. Results from this study are integrated with findings from a previous study published in the last issue of the *AFCEC Journal*.*

Alabama's Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) has played a significant role in the State's efforts to prepare its secondary students with disabilities for a more successful transition from school-to-work and into the community. In 1985, for example, the first formal cooperative agreements with local schools were developed by DRS, and, within two years, the Division had signed interagency agreements with all of the State's 129 Local Education Agencies (LEAs), as well as assigned a rehabilitation liaison counselor to every secondary school (Browning, Whetstone, & Boswell, 1992). DRS's transition caseloads have steadily increased since then. The number of transition clients was 9,216 students in 1987, for example, as compared to 13,560 such students in 1991; and since 1987, successful closures have more than doubled, with 1,630 such cases successfully rehabilitated in 1991.

The purpose of this study was to examine the opinions and practices of the State's rehabilitation counselors who are assigned to serve secondary students with disabilities. This study complements a recent statewide study of Alabama's secondary special education teachers and special education coordinators (Brown, Browning, & Dunn, 1992). Like the previous study, the findings of the present one are to provide State personnel with information as a decision-making base for program planning and improvement in the area of transition.

METHODS

Sample

A questionnaire was sent to Alabama's DRS counselors assigned to serve transition clients (students with disabilities from ages 15-25). Fifty-

nine of the 76 counselors completed their survey instrument for a return rate of 78%; however, not all 59 counselors answered every survey item. The 59 respondents had been a counselor for an average of 9 years, 6 months, and had been serving "transition" clients for an average of 6 years, 6 months. Also, 47 (82%) of them were assigned to one or more LEAs, for an average of 3.4 LEAs per counselor.

Seventeen counselors (29%) had a caseload of *only* transition clients, as compared to 27 (47%) whose caseload consisted of one-half (or less) of these student-aged clients. The average number of transition clients served by each counselor was 118, totaling 6,372 with a range of 10 to 300 such clients per counselor. Thirty-seven of the 52 counselors (71%) respectively added the students to their caseloads while the students were in the 9th grade, or before they entered 11th grade.

Questionnaire

The protocol for this questionnaire was developed by combining information from two previously constructed instruments for obtaining similar information (Brown et al., 1992). The ques-

tionnaire for this study consisted of 60 items clustered into seven categories: (a) Individualized Transition Program (IEP/TWRP), (b) Student/Parent Participation in Transition, (c) Assessment, (d) Vocational Preparation, (e) Service Coordination, (f) Transition Counselor Competencies, and (g) Transition Outcome.

RESULTS

Transition Components

The counselors were introduced to six transition components and asked their level of importance in preparing their clients for a successful transition from school-to-work. They were provided with five response options (for example, *not important*, *only slightly important*). Table 1 presents the results for each component in terms of counselor frequencies for two of the five response options: *important* and *very important*.

In addition, the counselors were provided a list of 12 competencies related to these component areas. They were to rate each according to the extent to which they thought it needed to be assessed in in-service training (*not needed*, *only*

Table 1. Importance of Transition Components as Perceived by Counselors

Transition Components	N Counselors	Important		Very Important		Combined %
		N	%	N	%	
IEP/TWRP	58	25	43	16	28	71*
Client Participation	59	25	42	16	28	84
Parent Participation	59	25	42	28	48	90
Assessment	58	19	33	35	60	93
Vocational Preparation	58	24	41	30	52	93
Service Coordination	59	22	37	30	51	88

* 71% of 58 counselors said that the development of a good IEP/TWRP was either *important* (43%) or *very important* (28%) for the successful transition of their clients.

slightly needed, moderately needed, needed, very much needed). The counselors' responses are reported within each of the sections below.

Individualized Transition Program (IEP/IWRP).

Given this component's level of importance (see Table 1), it is interesting that 33 (60%) of 54 counselors reported that they did not coordinate their clients' IEPs with their IWRPs (for example, tailor together the goals and objectives of the two plans). However, in a related item, the counselors said that the following two competencies either *needed* (38%) or *very much needed* (48%) to be addressed in in-service training: (a) Ability to more effectively coordinate IEP/IWRP goals and objectives which relate to my clients' transition-related programs and services; and (b) Ability to produce a higher quality IWRP, by more effectively coordinating/using ALL assessment information related to my transition clients.

Nearly half of the counselors reported that they either *seldom* (43%) or *never* (5%) met with the special education teachers to develop their clients' IEP/ITPs; whereas, only 7 (12%) said that they *always* attended the meetings. Also, 16 of 30 (53%) of the counselors who said that they *often* attended the meetings did so for only half (or less than) of their clients. The major reasons the counselors who either *seldom* or *never* attended the IEP/ITP meetings (a) were unaware of the meetings (56%), (b) had inadequate time (47%), (c) could not conveniently schedule meetings (25%), and (d) felt their role in the IEP meetings was unnecessary (16%).

Client/Parent Participation in the Transition Plan

Client Participation. In concurrence with the counselors' perceived importance of client participation (see Table 1), over 80% of them reported that their clients' vocational success was either *much related* (46%) or *highly related* (36%) to their clients' level of self-determination. When asked to select from a set of 11 factors the most

important ones for successful outcome, one of the most frequently chosen was "active client involvement in transition."

Over one-half of the counselors reported that they were only *moderately satisfied* (or less than) with their clients' level of self-interest and self-participation in planning their own transition program. Finally, 48% of them said that "the ability to get my transition clients to become more actively involved in planning and implementing their transition program" was either *needed* (28%) or *very much needed* (20%) as a focus for in-service.

Parent Participation. In concurrence with the counselors' perceived importance of parent participation (see Table 1), 64% of them reported that their clients' vocational success was either *much related* (47%) or *highly related* (17%) to the parents' level of involvement. And, when asked to select from a set of 11 factors the most important ones for successful outcome, one of the most frequently chosen was "active parent involvement in their children's transition."

Eight percent of the counselors reported that they were only *moderately satisfied* (or less than) with the support and involvement they received from parents. Also, 54% of them said that "the ability to get parents of my transition clients more actively involved in their children's transition plan and program" was either *needed* (24%) or *very much needed* (30%) as a topic for in-service training.

Assessment

In spite of the importance given to assessment (see Table 1), almost 40% of the counselors were only *moderately satisfied* (or less than) with its usefulness in helping them to make appropriate client decisions. Nearly 70% of the counselors reported that their clients received a vocational assessment before the 11th grade. Also, 37 (63%) of them said that *they* were the ones who were primarily responsible for obtaining assessment information.

The counselors said that the following three competencies either *needed* or *very much needed* to be addressed in in-service training: (a) Knowledge of assessment approaches which stress a close relationship between client evaluation information obtained and the type of transition services that should be delivered (48%); (b) Knowledge of an array of assessment instruments that are appropriate for my transition clients (36%); and (c) Ability to evaluate and select from an array of assessment instruments those which are most appropriate for different types of transition clients with varying needs (18%).

Vocational Preparation

The importance the counselors gave to this component was anticipated (see Table 1). What is surprising, however, is that only half of the counselors said that their clients participated in "community-based" work-experience programs. The persons most responsible for coordinating work-experience programs for their clients were (a) the counselors themselves (31%), (b) the vocational education teacher (22%), and (c) the special education teacher (22%).

The three most frequent skill areas in which the counselors said that their clients needed better and/or more effective training were (a) vocational skill training, (b) personal-social skill training, and (c) functional academic skill training. Additionally, the counselors reported that the three most important ways for improving vocational preparation were (a) better and/or more community-based work experience (30%), (b) better and/or more vocational education experience (16%), and (c) better high school vocational curriculum (15%). Sixty-three percent of the counselors reported that the vocational education teacher was the person who provided vocational instruction to their transition clients; whereas, 25% reported the special education teacher. Also, 56% of the counselors said that "the ability to more effectively coordinate transition planning between vocational education and rehabilitation services" was either a *needed* (28%) or *very much needed* (28%) topic for in-service training.

Coordination of Services

Even though the counselors considered this component to be important (see Table 1), nearly half (45%) of them reported that they were only *moderately satisfied* (or less than) with the coordination of services among the agencies. Eighteen of 55 counselors (32%) reported that one of the most important ways to improve the coordination of services was for there to be a "more effective system for exchanging information." Also, they said that the following two competencies either *needed* or *very much needed* to be addressed in in-service training: (a) Knowledge of eligibility requirements, program mandates, and resource opportunities of ALL agencies that provide transition-related services (70%); and (b) Ability to produce stronger transition programs for my clients, by more effectively coordination/using ALL community transition services (56%).

Transition Outcome

Nearly half of 56 counselors considered their clients to be only *moderately successful* in their transition from school to work; whereas, the remaining counselors (52%) considered their clients to be *successful*. When asked to select from a set of 11 factors the ones that they considered to be the most important for successful rehabilitation transition outcome, the three most frequently chosen were: (a) "active client involvement in transition," (b) "employment opportunities," and (c) "active parent involvement in their children's transition."

DISCUSSION

Clearly, the counselors viewed as *important* (or *very important*) all transition components. Within this context, discussion is directed to each component in terms of its results and implications for either training, research, or policy-making. Complementary results also are presented from the recently completed study with Alabama's secondary special education personnel (Brown, et al., 1992; Browning, Brown, & Dunn, 1993).

Individualized Transition Plan (IEP/IWRP)

In spite of the perceived importance of IEP/ITP meetings, nearly half of the counselors reported that they seldom or never attended them and, for those who *often* attended, as many as half of them said that they did so for no more than half of their clients. The typical assumption is that counselors do not attend the IEP/ITP meetings because they do not have the time. The results of this survey, however, was revealing in that other reasons were given, such as (a) being unaware of the meetings, (b) the scheduling inconvenience, (c) not being asked, and (d) not being considered by others to be important to the IEP process. In one case, a counselor stated, "some have felt that I was not important to their IEP."

Since the development of the student's IEP/ITP plan is to be a joint undertaking, the problem does not rest solely with the counselors. Just as counselors should become aware of the student's IEP, for example, teachers also should become familiar with the student's IWRP. Also, through in-service training, teachers need to be made more aware of the value of the counselor's role in transition, and acquire facilitative strategies for increasing their participation in the student's planning meetings. Ultimately, the answer to this and other collaborative problems in developing and implementing a quality transition plan and program may reside in the team approach (Halpern, Benz, & Lindstrom, 1992).

Half of the counselors reported the need to learn to develop a higher quality IWRP, and almost 40% of them expressed the need to learn through in-service training to more effectively coordinate the goals and objectives of the IEP and IWRP. This need was further underscored when over half of the counselors said that they did not tailor the goals and objectives of the IEP and IWRP.

Client/Parent Participation

Nearly 85% of the counselors attested to the importance of their clients being actively involved

in developing their own transition plans and programs. Also, they considered that their clients' involvement and self-determination was related to the clients' vocational success. Nevertheless, over half of the counselors said that they were only *moderately satisfied* (or less than) with their transition clients' level of involvement, and almost half of them expressed a need for this problem to be addressed in in-service training. This topic is in keeping with the fact that student/client self-determination may well be one of the five major Federal transition initiatives for the remainder of the 1990s (Browning, Brown, & Dunn, 1993; Halloren, 1993).

Likewise, parent involvement in their children's transition program was viewed as being important by 90% of the counselors, and in fact, over 69% of them considered the parents' involvement to be related to their children's vocational success. Yet, 80% of the counselors said that they were only *moderately satisfied* (or less than) with the parents' involvement and support. Similarly, Brown et al. (1992) found that nearly half of Alabama's surveyed, secondary special education teachers were either *very dissatisfied* or *dissatisfied* with the support they received from their students' parents. Half of the counselors also expressed a need to improve their ability through training to get their clients' parents more involved in the transition process.

Assessment

Assessment was considered to be the most important of the transition elements. Sixty percent of the counselors said that it was *very important* as compared, for example, to only 28% who gave the same level of importance to the IEP/ITP. Its significance to the students' individualized transition program rests with the premise that the quality of the IEP/ITP Plan is determined, in part, by the nature of the assessment information gathered for developing the plan (Browning, Dunn, & Brown, 1993). As such, it is important to note that nearly 40% of the counselors were only *moderately satisfied* (or less than) with the assessment

information and its usefulness in helping them to make appropriate client decisions.

The State has taken recent action to address assessment. First, through DRS's Task Force on Functional Assessment in Transition, a policy was developed for the establishment of locally-based assessment programs for secondary students in transition. A program, it was proposed, would provide guidelines and procedures for such matters as (a) the type of assessment information to be obtained, (b) who would be responsible for gathering it, (c) time periods for acquiring it, (d) standard ways for reporting it, and (e) locating a central place for storing and retrieving such information (Browning & Brechin, 1993). The State now has committed to funding two local transition teams for developing exemplary functional assessment programs to serve as model demonstration in-service training sites.

Vocational Preparation

Given the importance of vocational preparation for client outcome (employment), it is alarming that only 27% of 58 counselors reported that their transition clients participated in community-based, work-experience programs. This finding is supported in another study (Browning et al., 1993), in which only 22% of the State's surveyed, secondary special education teachers said that their students were instructed in community-work sites. Also, like the counselors in the present study, the State's special education coordinators reported that one of the three most important ways to improve the vocational preparation programs was through community-based work experience (Browning et al., 1993).

The State has taken a major step in addressing this problem through the provision of incentive mini-grants for local LEAs to establish work experience programs. As of this writing, 32 such mini-grants have been provided for a total of \$100,000 per year. A number of these sites have now established advanced vocational secondary programs in the State. Dothan (Spraybarry, Holmes, Sasser, and Stringer, 1992), Gardendale (Parker,

1992), and Jefferson County (Lavender, 1992), for example, have now developed exemplary programs that can be used as demonstration sites and in-service training laboratories. A continued emphasis in this area is essential, for community-based work experiences and opportunities will be likely Federal transition initiatives for the remainder of the 1990s (Halloran, 1993).

According to over 60% of the counselors, vocational education is the primary way through which students receive their vocational preparation. Similarly, Browning et al. (1993) reported that 69% of the State's surveyed special education teachers said that vocational education was the *only one* who provided vocational instruction to their special education students. Finally, over half of the counselors said that there needed to be more effective coordination of transition planning and programming between vocational education and rehabilitation services.

A Statewide study needs to be conducted with Alabama's vocational education programs. For example, do the vocational education instructors participate in the students' IEP/TTP meetings? Given that a major responsibility of vocational education is the placement of its students, do vocational instructors coordinate their efforts with rehabilitation counselors? The answers to these and other questions will provide State administrators with a basis for improving its transition programs and practices.

Coordination

Even though over 85% of the counselors said that the coordination of services among various agencies was important, over half of them were only *moderately satisfied* (or less than) with this transition component. Similarly, Browning et al. (1993) reported that half of the sampled special education teachers and half of the special education coordinators said that they were either very *dissatisfied* or *dissatisfied* (or less than) with their system's arrangements for assisting their students in the transition from school-to-adult life. Also, the special education coordinators reported that

one of the more important ways for improving their programs was for them to be provided with "technical assistance" to establish transition agreements with community agencies.

Over half of the counselors said they needed to improve their ability to produce stronger transition programs for their clients by more effectively coordinating and using ALL community transition services/resources. Likewise, 134 special education teachers (45%) reported that they needed improvement in their ability to coordinate programming between school and community settings (Browning et al., 1993). Also, 70% of the counselors and 39% of the special education teachers said that they needed improvement in their knowledge of eligibility requirements, program mandates, and resource opportunities of ALL agencies that provide transition-related services. Finally, over 30% of the counselors reported that the most effective way to improve coordination among agencies was through a more effective system for exchanging information.

Clearly, the area of coordination is a matter that needs serious attention. As discussed elsewhere (Browning et al., 1993), one important consideration is (a) the development and implementation of a coherent and consistent policy for interagency action at all levels; (b) a policy that includes goals, understanding of service eligibility and entitlement requirements, commonly-shared language and information among service-delivery systems; and (c) a consensus on the type and scope of services provided within each level of the service-delivery system (Johnson, Bruininks, & Thurlow, 1987). While such a State policy already may be in existence, the data from both surveys strongly suggest that, if it is, it is either not being enacted, needs revising, or needs to be better articulated to its users at the local level.

Transition Outcome

Using a five-point scale, nearly half of the counselors said that their clients were only *moderately successful*, and the remainder indicated *success*

ful. While such information is not to be discarded, it is viewed only as counselors' perceptions. In order to accurately and meaningfully answer this outcome question, it is recommended that the State consider incorporating a follow-along, tracking system into its programs. Consider, for example, that only 24 of 79 of Alabama's surveyed special education coordinators indicated that their LEA obtained any follow-up information on their students with disabilities (Brown et al., 1992). Of those 24, 80% said that they were only informal procedures. Likewise, 36% of 302 secondary special education teachers said that they had no follow-up information on their students.

Although a number of states have not done follow-along research, with the exception of Vermont (Hasazi, Hock, & Cravedi-Cheng, 1992), few at this time have on-going tracking systems in place. Nevertheless, this is expected to change with the new Federal initiative which makes one-time, five-year competitive "systems change" transition grants to state education and rehabilitation agencies (*Federal Register*, 1992). Specifically, the applicant must propose a means to demonstrate the impact of their transition services. In response to this stipulation, many of the 24 states already awarded these grants are incorporating on-going, follow-along tracking systems. Systems such as these will serve "all" transition stakeholders with an on-going feedback mechanism for needed program improvement, as well as an accountability measure of performance (Browning, Dunn, & Brown, 1993).

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